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Mr. Robert Oliphant

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● (1230)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.)): I'm calling this meeting to order. This is the 118th meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for the consideration of our study on the impact of irregular crossing of Canada's southern border.

We thank you, Mr. Vaughan and Mr. MacArthur, for joining us today. This is our second meeting on this topic. We have about an hour. We may not need the full hour in this particular session. If our witnesses for the second hour arrive early, we may terminate this a little ahead of the hour to leave a bit more time for the larger panel.

We invite you now, Mr. Vaughan, for about 10 minutes, to present your thoughts.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development (Housing and Urban Affairs)): Thanks very much, and thanks for the opportunity to talk about situations confronting a lot of municipalities and provinces across the country as we deal with a surge of shelter users —not just in Toronto, the riding I happen to represent. I'm here, of course, in my capacity as the parliamentary secretary for housing and urban affairs. The situation, as it relates to the province and to the City of Toronto, does not differ radically from the situations in Quebec and large cities like Montreal.

First and foremost, we want to thank those cities for the hard work they've been doing in the last few months as we have experienced a surge of shelter users and people seeking supports, some of which has been driven, of course, by the situation at the borders. It is also part of a larger picture of challenges around housing facing us as a country. We want to thank those partners because we know that cities are on the front line, doing the heavy lifting. The provinces, quite often, are the organizations that provide immediate response as the federal programs kick in.

The situation confronting Toronto is not a crisis in the refugee system. The situation facing Toronto is a housing crisis, and there has been a housing crisis in Toronto since the mid-1990s. If you take a look at the recent statistics, you'll see that there has been a surge in a particular population, but the city's shelter system has been running at over 90% capacity for the last decade. In fact, the crisis was identified in a groundbreaking report in 1999 by Anne Golden, which shows that there is a significant and dangerous trend in housing dynamics across this country and that cities can no longer rely on shelter systems to provide housing.

Our government did not wait for a situation at the border to act. It did not wait for a call from the communities to respond. In our first budget, we doubled the money for homelessness, in particular to get people out of shelters and into supportive housing, and to provide more support for prevention. We tripled the dollars going to provinces by investing in affordable housing funds. Those investments are paying off, with additional resources on the streets. That's why the shelters in these cities haven't reached capacity.

The challenge is that we need a national housing strategy to address this in a fundamental, systematic way so that we have surge capacity in our emergency housing sector. The challenge is to depopulate our shelters, not simply to build more and more shelters. The $40-billion investment in the national housing strategy, which is already being spent in communities from coast to coast to coast—I've been from B.C. to Saint John to the north this year, cutting ribbons on projects—is our response to this present challenge. We have to take a look at exactly what kind of housing we need and work with our provincial and territorial partners, as well as with indigenous governments and municipalities, to make sure that those dollars roll out as quickly as possible.

In terms of the situation that has garnered the most attention, which is the situation of the Toronto shelter system, a long-standing challenge in Toronto has been that half the people in the shelter system are children. This is as true for long-term Canadian populations and multi-generational Canadian families as it is for immigrant and refugee families. Half the people in the city's shelter system, since 1999, have been children.

We've done site visits of the motels in the shelter system, which are currently housing some of the new refugees, asylum claimants, migrants, and immigrants. When you go up to those centres, what you see are buildings full of children. This image, this stereotype of a single person crossing the border, a meme that we saw recently on social media, is just false. It's just not the experience of Toronto, and it's not the experience of the numbers we're seeing.

What we need to do is figure out a strategy that houses families effectively. We are working very hard with the City of Toronto and other municipalities across Ontario, as well as with the Province of Quebec, to set up a system that triages at point of entry, whether it's a regular point of entry or an irregular border crossing, to move families in particular into housing and not shelters, and to support them with the dollars that are part of the federal government's investment in affordable housing and homelessness. This is the strategy and the plan that have been in place since day one when this government took office.

The issue here, as I said, and I will state it again, is that we have a housing crisis in major cities in this country. In large part that's because people flock to major cities when they are in need of housing, because they perceive there to be both employment and housing resources in those communities. Unfortunately Toronto, having sustained a 90%-plus surge in its shelter system, is at a point now where it needs a network of support around it to redistribute some of those families and put them in places where they're going to thrive and contribute to their own lives and the communities they're in.

● (1235)

The model we want to use in Ontario, or we thought we were on the way to using, was the model we put in place in Quebec. A triage system at a point of entry identifies the composition of the family, the composition of the group seeking asylum. It maps the provincial housing system across the entire province. It maps where the financial resources and immigrant support services are, as well as language supports for different groups, because they present at the border differently. It redistributes the pressure so that no one city carries the whole load. In fact, the entire provincial system is kicked into place, and the federal supports that are there are added to the mix to make sure that provinces and municipalities get the supports they need, but also that the people seeking asylum get the supports they're entitled to and are required to be provided with so that the system effectively works.

In the absence of the provincial system being available to us—and the provincial government has suggested that this is uniquely a federal responsibility—which the federal government actually funds on a day-to-day, month-to-month, and year-to-year basis through the social transfer, we've had to reach out to municipalities and municipal partners across the province and basically remap the system that is already in place. We're now working with other municipalities across Ontario to redistribute the pressure and to move people into good, strong housing communities with the right supports. That situation is being mitigated and being worked on.

At the end of the day, quite frankly, if this country is not prepared to move children out of shelters, regardless of their immigration status or citizenship status, if this country is not prepared to put an end to the practice of putting children in emergency shelters, this problem is going to persist. The fear we have, as it relates to emergency housing, is that as we watch the forest fires in northern Ontario, as we see what happened in Fort McMurray, with 80,000 people being displaced very quickly, and as we watch the floods in New Brunswick or the floods in Manitoba that have yet to be addressed in terms of new permanent housing, what we know and what we are seeing is that significant, volatile, sudden, and large population displacements are the new normal. Whether they come from across the border or from inside your province or from across the border of provincial jurisdictions, the reality is that we can no longer sustain an emergency housing system at 90% capacity. It is not sustainable. If we're going to take care of Canadians, we need to create a different kind of housing system. If we're going to make sure we have capacity going forward into the next century, we're going to have to build a housing system that doesn't utilize emergency housing at a 90% capacity rate. It's just that simple.

I'm very proud to be part of a government that recognizes this. It did it from day one of taking office, almost three years ago. As I said, it doubled the amount of money going into homelessness supports across this country and tripled the provincial transfers. It has sustained the social transfers to provinces, and it is currently signing bilaterals, province to province to province right across the country—including, I might add, already one with Ontario. The resources are there. The system is being rebuilt. The focus on getting children, regardless of their status, out of these shelters is under way.

The plan, from our perspective, would be enhanced with provincial participation, but it is not the first time that a provincial government has shirked its responsibilities. In fact, if you go to the Anne Golden report from 1999 and take a look at the recommendations contained in that report, which was the first significant response to homelessness in Toronto, you'll see that it talks about provincial–federal gridlock. At that time, the provinces demanded total control of the housing sector and asked the federal government to get out. At that time, the provincial government in Ontario said that it, and not the federal government, was responsible for housing. What has changed is that now we have a provincial government that says it needs federal help. The good news is that the federal government is there to help.

This jurisdictional gridlock is what has sustained the housing crisis in Ontario and Toronto. It has hurt other provinces just as much. It's time for every level of government, all orders of government, to pull together and solve this problem. If it's migrants today, it will be people from a forest fire tomorrow, or people from a flood the day after that. We need to build a stronger housing system in this country, and that means we have to step up as a federal government.

One reason I'm here today is that when I was a reporter covering this issue back in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I happened to come to Ottawa and question one Stephen Harper about this. Stephen Harper's response to me was to go read the Constitution. His instruction was to read the Constitution. His explicit instructions were that housing was not a federal responsibility and his government wouldn't participate. What made the housing crisis worse since the Anne Golden report was the previous 10 years of government, which effectively cut supports for homelessness, cut supports for construction and repairs, and eliminated the federal presence and subsidies right across this country.

● (1240)

If we had not come through the last decade with weakened housing resources, the City of Toronto, the City of Montreal, Vancouver, and other municipalities right across this country would not be in a position to be frustrated in their response. We would have a robust system. We would have emergency housing being constructed and maintained. Instead, we have the exact opposite.

I'll add one last note. The first act, the very first act, of the provincial government in Ontario was to eliminate $800 million in committed funds for repairs to Toronto community housing. Toronto community housing will now lose one unit of housing per day more than they're building. That will only make the situation worse. We need provincial partnership on this, and we are looking forward to Ontario stepping up regardless of the citizenship status of children.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

We will begin with Madame Mendès.

[*Translation*]

You have seven minutes.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Vaughan, it would be helpful to underscore what you said about the Quebec government's co-operation on this issue, which started to emerge more clearly in 2016. As you said, it didn't happen overnight. What is new and more recent, however, is the significant number of people crossing the border at Roxham Road. I was quite glad to hear you point out the co-operation you received from the Quebec government. Given the success achieved under the agreement between the federal and Quebec governments, the effort bears repeating elsewhere.

You set up triage centres and began working closely with the Canada Border Services Agency and RCMP. An entire network of non-governmental organizations is also involved, working to support the efforts of both the federal and provincial governments. A regionalized approach, if you will, was taken to deal with the challenge posed by the refugee claimants. Could you tell us once again what was done in Quebec's case? How do we replicate what worked in Quebec, especially in Ontario?

It is also a matter of housing. Right now, Montreal is at 50% capacity, which means that the approach and the agreement with the Quebec government are working.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

The system in Quebec is a good one, and it's starting to prove that it has the capacity to manage the situation that is present, in particular because of the way in which the border crossing manifests itself between the United States and Quebec.

First of all, Quebec runs its shelter system at 75% capacity, not at 90% capacity, so when you get these irregular surges in any population of homeless individuals, there's capacity to manage and also to shift resources and to model them around the population of homeless people, as opposed to running it at full capacity and not having that flexibility. That's in large part because the Province of Quebec has invested so strategically and so heavily in prevention strategies, but also in permanent housing and supportive housing, which is one of the best ways to deal with depopulating shelters.

The system that's in play in Quebec, which we think would be easily replicated in Ontario because there is the same basic funding relationship between the province, the federal government, and the municipalities, is a federal triage system that has access to provincial mapping of emergency, but also vacant housing across the entire province. It then models people into where the vacancies exist. It redistributes the pressure from major centres into other centres. It then steps up with additional resources around language, immigrant resettlement services, and everything right down to how their hearings are managed and mapped across the entire system. This triage system takes advantage of the existing provincial social service network and simply has it mapped in real time so that when people arrive they can be triaged into the process.

There are two other things that are critical about this. One is that the numbers haven't quite reached the 2008 numbers. I don't know what Stephen Harper tweeted in 2008 to get to the numbers they got to in terms of border crossings, but something happened back in 2008. That surge capacity was also managed with the existing provincial systems. The difference is that right now we have one province that doesn't want to participate. It doesn't want to use its system to help create a triage system in a significant area of pressure.

What is happening is that the system that was built in Quebec has the capacity to manage this. It does require additional federal resources; that's why the $50 million as an initial payment came forward to help with those challenges. It allows you to map the system, migrate the people into the system in an orderly, structured way, with resources attached to the different files, and then process them in an orderly way and make sure that Canadians are kept safe but also that the migrants, immigrants, and refugees are kept safe.

We know we can replicate the system in Quebec because we were on the verge of doing it with the Province of Ontario before the election. We think that, with co-operation, we could get there. If we can't, we will continue to provide the services we need to make sure that children in particular are kept in a safe environment with services that they require.

We won't be doing things like pulling refugee health care away from people and loading onto provinces extraordinary costs but also extraordinary risks to the health care system. Those sorts of approaches to immigration, regular or irregular, legal or illegal, are unacceptable. This government, as a result, has restored that funding to provinces and will continue to engage with provinces in a positive way to be proactive about this and to create a systemic response to what is clearly an irregular surge. Nonetheless, we need to build systems to manage it.

● (1245)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Thank you.

I would say that, in Quebec, we also had the benefit of lessons learned over the past 30 years. As I mentioned earlier, the fact that I worked extensively in the immigration sector for 15 or so years no doubt gives away my age.

Having gone through a number of immigration waves, Quebec had to draw some important lessons. One wave, in particular, left quite an impact on me. It was back when I began working at the Maison internationale de la Rive-Sud, a settlement and support service for immigrants and refugees. At the time, Montreal was coping with a surge in refugees, or claimants, from Romania; they would stow away on shipping containers. The stories we heard were awful. Many of them died in transit from Europe. Not to mention, those who did survive the journey arrived in poor condition, placing an immediate and considerable strain on the health care system. They needed not just physical care, but also psychosocial services. As you can imagine, they were scarred by the journey.

Back then, the late 1980s and early 1990s, Quebec was on the receiving end of a rather massive influx of people crossing into the country irregularly, so the province was forced to adapt. I'm very proud to see that the province not only kept up its capacity to receive newcomers, but also increased that capacity by working with the federal government. That was thanks, however, to the Quebec government sitting down with the federal government. As I see it, the key lies in coming to the table and working together to find the best possible solutions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Mendès. Your time is up.

Mr. Poilievre, you may go ahead.

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): How many years did you spend on Toronto City Council?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I spent just short of eight years on Toronto City Council.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm just looking at a study done by the C. D. Howe Institute, an organization formerly headed by your Liberal finance minister, Bill Morneau. It shows that the increased cost of housing in Toronto due to municipal regulation and red tape is $168,000. In other words, red tape that you helped impose in the city of Toronto increases the cost of each single house by $168,000.

When I found out, Mr. Vaughan, that you were here to testify about housing, I assumed you were coming to apologize to all the people who lost out on the opportunity to live near where the jobs and the opportunities are because of all the red tape you imposed in increasing the cost of housing.

Now, on the issue at hand—

● (1250)

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I'm glad you agree that's not the issue at hand.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —you've said that you have this system of triaging the illegal border crossers after they enter into Canada. How much money has been spent by your government on busing illegal border crossers from one place to another?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I will defer to the department that spends those dollars to give you that answer.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: But in terms of the issue you're raising—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sorry, the question is, how much has been spent on busing?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The issue of transportation of people from point of entry to safe housing is not part of the ministry that I work for, so I won't have those dollars.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're responsible for the housing portfolio, are you not?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That's right.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. So you're saying that busing them to the housing is not your responsibility. You don't have any knowledge of how much that costs.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It's not a budget line that appears in the briefing notes that I've been prepared—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. So you don't know because it's not in your briefing notes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Well, it's—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Next question. Earlier today we learned that there are about 800 illegal border crossers who are staying in dormitories on campuses. Students will soon return to school, and those illegal border crossers will be evicted from those dormitories. We learned this morning that they will be moved to hotels. That is the government's plan to house these illegal border crossers.

How much will it cost to house the illegal border crossers in hotels in the coming year?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That's a decision that's made by shelter services in a place like Toronto, and in particular with those individuals. But hotels are being used—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Who will pay for it?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It will be paid for by all three levels of government—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How much will it cost?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —because right now the City of Toronto's claim is that there is a $65-million price tag to the surge that's being experienced this year.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. But my question—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The challenge is that—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sorry, but with respect, Mr. Vaughan, our time is very limited.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I'm answering the question.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're responsible for housing. You're here to testify particularly on the illegal border crossers. Your government has made the decision to house these border crossers in hotels once they're evicted from dormitories.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: No. It was a joint decision by all three levels of government to do that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How much will it cost?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The City of Toronto has said that the cost pressure they're facing is in the area of $65 million. What they haven't done is break that down into families and individuals. It is families that are being housed in the student residences.

As to the use of hotels, we're now about 20 years down that road. Those costs have been folded into both the social service transfer and the HPS dollars, the $23 million a year that comes to the City of Toronto—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: But how much? How much will it cost?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The trouble is that the breakdown on that population includes all families seeking shelter in Toronto, not just immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So you don't know how much that will cost.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Well, this is part of the reason why we need more split-out statistics, which the province has and is withholding from us, and which the city has and hasn't shared with the province.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: What we've said is that we accept that there is a federal responsibility and role here. We have a $40-billion housing program. The goal here is not simply to house people in hotels; it is to move people into proper housing.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, and—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The other component to this—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sorry. With respect, you already gave your speech.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Well, I'm answering your question.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're not answering my question. The question—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The other component to this is that when you—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —was very simple: How much will it cost?

The Chair: I would just remind both the witness and the member that to speak one at a time would be helpful for the interpreters.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Chair, the question was how much it would cost to house people in hotels. The witness has now said that he does not have an answer to that question.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That's not what I said. I was answering your question.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I want to move on to another question, then, if he cannot answer that one.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I will answer that one—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: He has indicated that he does not know the cost of busing people from the border to their next location. He does not know what the cost will be—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: You're putting words in my mouth—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —to house them in individual hotels.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —and I refute the conclusions you've reached with your own facts.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: My question then is this. How many illegal border crossers have entered into this country since your government took office?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Again, you're asking deliberate questions that are outside the area of responsibility—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Do you know the answer?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: You're asking questions that are outside.... You have the Minister of Immigration coming next. I'm sure he can give you those answers.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So you don't—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: My responsibility to this is to the housing file.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sorry, Mr. Chair, my questions are very narrowly focused on the facts. I've asked the member who's responsible—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: They aren't narrowly focused on the ministry I represent.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —for speaking on behalf of the largest department in the Government of Canada—Employment and Social Development. He is responsible for all the housing programs and social services related to the entry of illegal border crossers into this country. I have asked him what the expenditure, the cost will be to put people in hotels. What will be the cost to bus them around?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: As a—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I've asked him if he even knows how many illegal border crossers have arrived since his government took office, and so far he has not been able to answer a single one of these questions.

Let me ask you another question.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Well, let me try to answer the question before you tell me I can't answer it.

● (1255)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Maybe you will have more luck with this next question. How much have all levels of government had to spend, to date, on illegal border crossers since your government took office?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I'm responsible for the housing part of the equation, and on the housing part of the equation there is a mixed model in terms of the delivery of the system. So, for example, if you are given a work permit and you move—and the average stay in a hotel is less than three months—into a private residence and you pay your own rent with a job, it doesn't appear as—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How much?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —a cost on the government books.

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): He doesn't know.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The situation is that the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario receive funding to deal with the population and the shelter system. We have spent $200 million a year on HPS services across the country. I can't break that down as to how much of those dollars on a day-by-day basis is spent on—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm not asking for day by day.

Mr. Chair, the witness has said that he's not responsible, and I agree.

Thank you.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That's not what I said.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, go ahead for seven minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

On the housing issue, I would like to first establish this fact. The housing crisis, as Mr. Vaughan indicated, really began in the mid-1990s, and of course Mr. Vaughan will know that in 1993 the federal Liberal government cancelled the national affordable housing program. That was under the Liberal government, under Paul Martin. As a result of that, this country lost more than half a million units of affordable housing that would otherwise have been built across the country. So imagine what our country would look like today if we had an additional half a million units of affordable or co-op housing. Therefore, the housing crisis we're in is in part a result of the Liberal government's action.

That said, we do have a situation, and I would argue that the need for affordable housing is across the board. I see it in my community in British Columbia, in Vancouver East, absolutely, but I see it across the country as well. This situation of course is challenged because of the asylum seekers coming over. Mr. Vaughan talked about a national affordable housing plan. Let me just establish this fact as well. It's good that the federal government has come back to the table —I will say that. However, 90% of the funding for that national affordable housing plan will not flow until after the next election, and that is a bit of a challenge as well—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That's not true.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —because we need the housing right now. As you all know, if you've dealt with housing in the non-profit sector—and I used to, prior to this life—when you build housing, it takes several years, at best, to get a project off the ground, especially if it involves rezoning. It takes sometimes five years, six years, or 10 years to get a project off the ground.

We have a housing crisis. Right now, the City of Toronto projects $65 million in terms of its cost to deal with the housing aspect of the irregular asylum seekers, a large portion of whom are going into hotels. I want to ask this question. Instead of putting that money into a hotel, which will be gone after people leave, why don't we invest that money in a permanent building: redirect that money, purchase a building, and make that available for asylum seekers when the influx is here? Then, when they're not here, you can make that available to local people for transition into permanent housing, or even regularize the refugee program as we've seen with the Syrian refugees. When they first came, many of them were also put in hotels. Instead of doing that, get a permanent building, or a series of permanent buildings, in which you can house asylum seekers and refugees coming through.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I couldn't agree with you more.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is that something, then—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We have been trying to persuade, in particular, NDP members of Toronto City Council to stop building shelters and start building housing. I agree with you. That is the solution.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is that something you are advancing within your own government?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Absolutely.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If so, have you offered the solution of purchasing permanent buildings for inland asylum seekers?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Yes. The national housing strategy accommodates that. To correct the record, the tripling of the transfers to the provinces started in our first budget, so those dollars are being spent now as the 10-year program kicks in. It's actually a 12-year spending profile, and we have north of $4 billion already. The supports for cities that wish to purchase, rather than to rent hotels, is part of the national housing strategy. They can use those dollars to purchase rather than rent.

The trouble is that we have to move cities from the emergency response into a permanent structure of systemic response. The dollars we have put on the table that are being spent as we speak are doing just that. In fact, in the City of Vancouver—

● (1300)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The $65 million—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The $90 million that was just invested in the City of Victoria effectively does that, and those dollars were spent this year.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Vaughan, it would be really helpful if you actually answered the question. Let me just establish this. Of the $65 million that the City of Toronto has put on the table and has said it needs for the inland asylum seekers, how much is the federal government going to pay?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We have said we are prepared to sit down with the City of Toronto and examine exactly how to deliver the support they need. We are not walking away from that obligation. Given that—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do you have a figure that you can offer of how much you will contribute toward that?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We have immediately transferred $11 million out of the first $50 million, and we are sitting down to review the request. We need to see the statistics and the data to see how it's being spent and to understand where other supports that flow through the province to the city are being spent in support of this. In terms of—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right, so let me ask you this question.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the flexibility—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Please, I only have seven minutes. Don't waste my time.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I didn't realize answering questions was wasting your time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So you don't know how much is going to be directed toward the $65 million. How much have you actually offered on the table to the provinces to purchase buildings for the purposes of asylum seekers?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: As I said, the national housing strategy, which was tripled in size in the budget in our first year, is there for just that. It's there to address pressures on the emergency housing system and create systemic responses to underserved populations. Those dollars are flowing immediately—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You have a situation that's going on at this moment. How much of the dollars is being offered on the table to the provinces—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Provinces and cities have choices to make about the federal resources.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —to work with them to purchase a building for the asylum seekers, as opposed to dumping that money into hotels?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: If the city would rather purchase buildings than rent buildings, it is their choice to make. The flexibility for a program to do that is in place right now.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So how much have you offered them?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We have, as a down payment, the first $50 million, which was an initial emergency response with a commitment to sit down and fulfill it based on a per capita read of where they are—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Are you saying the amount you've offered them is $11 million?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: As an initial installment with more installments to follow.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: When is the next installment coming in?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: When we sit down with the province and work out a system where each municipality is measured, because we can't just respond to one city at a time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do you have a date planned for your next meeting, then?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I can assure you that the commitment that has been made to the mayor, with all ministers involved in this file, is to sit down and continue to work with them—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So when is the next meeting planned?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I am not attending that meeting and couldn't give you the exact date, but we have made a commitment with the mayor's office. I've been speaking with city councillors on a daily basis in the City of Toronto about the shelter system. The commitment is to sit down once we get the data, once we understand what the triage system across the province looks like, once we understand the redistribution of the pressure points, to address all provincial needs and all of the—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Vaughan, you're here at this committee answering questions, but you don't know when the next meeting is going to be, and you don't know what the plan is.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I can get back to you as to what they—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Then why are you even here answering questions if you don't know what the plan is?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Because we're detailing what the plan is.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

We'll go to Mr. Anandasangaree now. You are apparently sharing time.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Yes, thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Vaughan, for being here.

I'm actually a bit stunned right now, Mr. Chair, by the tone of this conversation. My impression was that we were going to have discussions with relevant ministries with respect to their response, but sadly we are not extending the respect that's required to our officials. I want to apologize for the tone and tenor of what's happening today.

As an MP for Scarborough, I know we've had several.... Mr. Chair, if I may, I'd like to continue without interruption from the opposition.

The Chair: If you'd like to make a point of order, you may.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: I want to make a point that this is—

The Chair: I would ask that MPs address questions to the witnesses through me.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: I think decorum is required. Unfortunately, when I have the floor and I am discussing.... I extended courtesy to the opposition when they were going on, and I think that courtesy needs to be extended to me when I am questioning the witness.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would just remind all members that we were dangerously close to my actually gavelling on decorum on the last questioner, so I would just ask all members to please use appropriate parliamentary decorum.

Ms. Rempel, go ahead.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have been, on many occasions, told to act nice and be nicer, and to watch my tone—

The Chair: Not by me.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —and frankly, just in defence of my female colleague here, I'm really glad that she took the tone she did.

● (1305)

The Chair: That point of order is not debatable.

Mr. Anandasangaree, would you like to continue?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you.

As a member of Parliament for Toronto, I've had a number of opportunities to meet with some of the asylum seekers, as have you.

Can you indicate to us the specific ask from the City of Toronto, what our federal response has been, and what the other levels of government have or have not done?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The specific request was for $65 million to deal with identified housing pressures that have emerged since last October. We immediately gave $11 million as we moved toward understanding exactly what federal dollars, provincial dollars, and city dollars had or hadn't reached the new surge.

We are in touch with the city on a virtually day-to-day basis. We were visiting the shelters last week. I was with shelter workers yesterday in a different shelter in the afternoon to talk about the surge and make sure that subpopulations are being served. For example, the LGBTQ community is also part of this migrant search, and we have to make sure that shelter capacity in all sectors of the shelter system is there. To be specific to the point that was just made, we're in touch with the city on a day-by-day basis. We don't schedule meetings; we meet. We meet and engage and make sure that the dollars and the supports are there and are flowing.

We continue, as well, to talk to the province. And we continue, as well, to talk to other shelter providers and other municipalities. I was talking with a member of the Nipissing housing authority, which has shelter space and housing space in North Bay, and making sure that the immigration department knew about that. As well, we tied them into the rehousing strategy. We are working on this every single day, because, quite frankly, it's intolerable that children are in a hotel or in a shelter. They need to be in a home, close to schools, and getting ready to be supported. That's the work we're doing day by day.

Does it require a 10 o'clock meeting and a telephone schedule that can be presented to a committee? No, it requires constant effort, constant attention, and constant investment in those areas. We have assured the City of Toronto that they will not be left hanging as they have been for the last 10 years by a government that didn't commit dollars to homelessness, didn't commit money to shelters, and didn't commit money to housing.

A final point I'd like to make is that one of the big losses in the last 10 years was the last Paul Martin budget, for which Jack Layton negotiated additional housing dollars and then voted against the budget and denied close to $200 million a year to go into the housing system. All parties have failed on this file. We all have to look at ourselves in the mirror and understand that the housing crisis, which is at the root of the issue we're dealing with in Toronto right now, is something that has emerged over the last 30 years. It started with Brian Mulroney's housing cuts in 1988. It was not helped by the NDP at Queen's Park when they made cuts to the repair of social housing and started the capital repair backlog in housing. All parties and all politicians contributed to this. The question is, what are we going to do to get out of it?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: What's hindering Toronto's ability, or our ability as a federal government, to resettle or move some of the folks from Toronto, particularly those who are currently at Centennial or Humber, into, say, Nipissing or other areas?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: My colleague from British Columbia identified it. It's hard to build housing quickly, and it's hard, once you've built it, to make sure it's always in the place where you will necessarily need it. Housing systems have to be sustained. They can't simply be sparked quickly. That's why the investments we made before introducing the national housing strategy started as soon as we took office. It was to get the housing sector building again.

We've had great success in some communities. We're struggling in others, Toronto being one of them. Victoria, with a $90-million investment, with the municipality, the province, and the federal government at the table, will effectively have reduced homelessness to functionally zero within two years. When all three levels of government work together, with the federal dollars that are there, with the provincial commitment, which is strong right now in B.C., and with the municipalities leading and fine-tuning the process, we are starting to see great results in Calgary, in London, and in Hamilton. However, there are certain jurisdictions that are magnets for a whole series of housing pressures and that have housing markets that are very hot. In those areas, there is a stubbornness to the housing crisis.

I can assure you that if we could get the numbers down to those we've seen with the shelter populations in Quebec, where you have 75% capacity, the pressure would come off the housing system in Toronto. We would resettle in an orderly way, particularly with children, and we would all be talking about a much different thing today.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Adam.

I'd like to pass the rest of my time to Nick Whalen.

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): Thank you.

I was a bit surprised earlier at Ms. Rempel's cynicism, insinuating that somehow the asylum seekers are responsible for their need to be in hotels, or that somehow anybody wants asylum seekers to go into hotels, or that somehow previous governments aren't responsible for that core housing need.

Of course, Mr. Beuze, who was here from UNHCR, reminded committee members that politicians should not be scapegoating asylum seekers for political gain by blaming them for pre-existing problems.

Then, of course, Mr. Poilievre went along the same lines, again trying to insinuate that somehow asylum seekers are tied to the lack of housing supports and shelters.

You've described already for us some of the legacy, that all parties are responsible for the housing shortage, but I would like to understand how we are working with cities like Toronto to create affordable housing to meet the needs of society, including specifically asylum seekers in the surge, both into shelters and into actual housing. How does our national housing strategy for the country as a whole take asylum seekers and migrants into account?

● (1310)

The Chair: You have 40 seconds.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The $40-billion investment into the country's housing system has already been parcelled out in terms of the 10-year response in Ontario. Ontario and Toronto will figure out how the bulk of those dollars are spent in the city of Toronto.

There are three main pressures in the city of Toronto that have to be addressed. There's the capital repair backlog, which is at about $2.6 billion right now in the city of Toronto. There is a 100,000-person wait-list, which has been held steady for the last 10 years, in large part because of the ingenuity of city councils fast-tracking the approval of affordable housing projects in particular—I was on council to do that. Additionally, we have to move with much more flexibility on the homelessness strategy to prevent homelessness and also mitigate homelessness by flowing people out.

In terms of the hotels, the City of Toronto has used hotels to house families for the better part of 15 years now, closer to 20 years. That system sees the average family stay for about 3.1 months. Those numbers surge when there is an influx of families, as there currently is, but that system returns very quickly to a situation—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan. I need to stop you there.

Ms. Rempel, you have five minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions will relate to the system that has been put in place to bus people who have crossed at Roxham Road and claimed asylum. This is the system that the government is referring to as the triage system.

Earlier in testimony today, we heard that the government does not want to close the loophole on the safe third country agreement, and then we had my colleague use the words "the new normal" in terms of the particular situation that is happening at Roxham Road.

My question relates to the budgetary efficacy and the efficacy of the government's system. How many people is the government projecting will cross at Roxham Road for the remainder of 2018, and then into 2019, who will subsequently be bused and require temporary shelter?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I will refer those questions to the departments that manage those questions so you can get specific answers, and—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm assuming you are here—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —the new normal I referred to was displacement of population, not the situation at the border.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm assuming you are here in your capacity as parliamentary secretary because you are supposed to be talking about the efficacy of your "triage system", yet—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: As it relates to housing—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —you cannot tell us how many people you are expecting to have to triage in the next year. Is that correct?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: What was seen is that the numbers crossing the border at that particular point have dropped now to below 40—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Actually—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —and as a result of that, the number is fluctuating and, thankfully, getting smaller.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —from June of last year to June of this year, it has increased year over year, so the graph is going like that.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Factually, that is incorrect.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You can't tell us how many people are going to cross the border, so how can you project how many hotel rooms will be needed?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That is the challenge of having an emergency shelter system that is beyond surge capacity.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You said it's the new normal.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The new normal requires us not to operate shelters at 90% capacity in normal times, because the new normal is displaced populations—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How many spaces are going to be required over the next year? You said that there will be more installment payments to provinces, and these installments are not part of the budgetary process. As parliamentarians, our role is to question government expenditures and their efficacy, so how many more hotel spots are you estimating will be required, and over what time period?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Currently, the city of Toronto's homeless population and shelter population is—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'll clarify. The question is specifically about people crossing at Roxham Road.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I'll give you an explanation. Currently, the shelter capacity in the city of Toronto stands at about 6,400 people, half of whom are children. That number has been holding steady at about 5,000 over the last seven years. The way to create shelter capacity—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay, I have limited time.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The way to create shelter capacity in the system is to get those people out of the shelters into permanent housing—that's the $40-billion national housing strategy.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm asking for stats. We're trying to figure out how much money it's going to need—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Then you have a set budget at the City of Toronto to deal with emergency housing.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I understand you're trying to talk the clock. That's fine, but we're not getting the numbers we need here.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I was just giving you the numbers.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: The reality is that your government is coming out and making an announcement on funding with no numbers attached to it. We can't assess how many people and for how long. Even though I might not agree with my colleague here on how, we need to be able to assess whether this is the best and most compassionate way to deal with people who are entering this country at Roxham Road, now that, as you said, this is the new normal.

● (1315)

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That's not what I said. What I said—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Certainly, I think that if you come to this meeting—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —was that the displacement of populations inside Canada is the new normal.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: To my colleague's point, if you've come to this meeting without these figures, then I don't understand—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I have the figures—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —why you're here. So I would ask—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —but you'd have to stop asking the question for me to answer it.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —given the amount of colourful commentary that you had around the provincial government, which has been in office for two weeks, if you are planning to run for the leadership of the Ontario Liberal Party.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The question that I think you're trying to ask is how we can move from the emergency housing system, which is the most expensive and least humane way to deal with any individual, no matter their immigration status, to a more robust housing program.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: No, I'm trying to understand how long people are going to need hotels for—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That would save cities and provinces money and—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —and how many people—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —more importantly it would save people's lives.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —are going to be in hotels, and how much it's going to cost the Canadian taxpayer.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The average stay in the hotel—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: To my colleague's question, the question is whether this is the best way to deal with people who are coming into the country this way, and whether Canada has the capacity to successfully integrate the number of people you have allowed to come into this country—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The premise of your question—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —by failing to close the loophole in the safe third country agreement.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —is that the system will be sustained, overwhelmed going forward—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: We are sitting here in the middle of the summer for meetings—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —and I disagree.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —and you have provided no context, no answers, and no statistics for us. You are going to be coming out, and you said you're going to have more instellment payments. Parliamentarians here outside of the budgetary process have less information than we did before. Your Prime Minister hired a minister who doesn't even know what his job is. Are you reporting to him?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I report to the Minister of Social Development—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So what does Bill Blair do? You can't tell us how many people are coming here—

Mr. Nick Whalen: There is a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —and the question you've asked is about statistics—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —and you can't tell us what his job is—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —and what I'm telling you—

The Chair: There is a point of order.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): This is the second time our colleague has wavered from the focus of the meeting.

The Chair: I would ask all members to stick to the agenda of the meeting.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. Blair's job is not really relevant here; neither is the Ontario Liberal Party.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: No, actually—

A voice: Well, they are.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: This is a response on the point of order, outside of my time.

The Prime Minister has appointed a minister to be in charge of this issue. This morning, Mr. Chair, he said he didn't know what his job is. Then we have a parliamentary secretary sitting here and saying he doesn't know how many people are coming in, and that we'd have to ask the Department of Immigration. This morning, the minister said that the CBSA and the RCMP don't report to him. What we're seeing here is completely relevant to the issue at hand, and that is that there is no plan from this government to manage the situation. There is no plan so that parliamentarians can look at the adequacy—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: There is a plan.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —of whether these budgetary expenses are adequate, whether they're compassionate, and on what projections they're being made. That is the data—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: There is quite clearly a plan—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —we were trying to get here today, and we've had minister after parliamentary secretary come woefully underprepared to provide this data to the committee.

It is in the scope, and I will continue these questions.

The Chair: Thank you. Please continue.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Mr. Vaughan, how many people, after crossing Roxham Road, do you project will need housing for the next 18 months?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: What we're seeing is a decline in the numbers, and therefore we believe, and hope, that the situation has peaked, which means—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? Fifteen thousand?

The Chair: That is the end of the time.

We now go to Mr. Fergus, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the parliamentary secretary for being with us today.

I'm going to continue with the same line of questioning as the member for Brossard-Saint-Lambert. My question is about Quebec and the triage system being used to deal with the claimants crossing the border there. That way, you can talk about what we should do and how Quebec could serve as a model for other provinces, Ontario, for instance, in terms of a system that works well.

Mr. Vaughan, could you take a moment to talk about Quebec and the system in place there?

[*English*]

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The Quebec system effectively maps out the social service and housing network across the entire province and brings relevant stakeholders together on an ongoing basis in a proactive way to manage homelessness, shelter use, and people in core housing need, but also other social dynamics. This is a very effective network that includes medical service as well, which is a critical part of what we're dealing with. This network allows the pressure points to be redistributed across a provincial network with federal support and with municipal local delivery models. It is worked as a triage system.

To the question that was asked about how much a bus costs, it depends whether it's going to Chicoutimi or to Gatineau. On a case-by-case basis, we look at what costs are incurred, and we support the province to mitigate those costs. What we rely on with the Province of Quebec is not the funding model but a systemic response, which we provide resources for and local municipalities deliver. This has proven to be exceptionally good at sustaining a population base in the shelter system below full capacity.

Currently in Canada there are 14,000 emergency shelter beds across the country on any given night. They are not always in the right city, for the right pressure point. Part of what the system has to do is try to get people to move to places where there is better housing to support them, as we build out the new national housing strategy and further reduce those numbers and that dependency. That's the systemic approach we're taking. Those are the numbers we're dealing with, and that's the investment we've made as a federal government.

● (1320)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: I'm going to follow up on that, Mr. Chair.

A few months back, in the spring, the Quebec government publicly complained that it had still not reached an agreement with the federal government to address the needs and increased costs.

How long did it take for the federal government to sit down with Quebec and work out an agreement?

[*English*]

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It happened almost immediately. That's where the $50 million came from, in particular, as the cities and the province approached us. We put the first installment down. Then we said, "Show us the ongoing costs as this problem moves through the system and changes day to day at the border, and we will match our support to the data you provide us."

The good news is that Quebec is providing that data. It's allowing us to have a good conversation with providing that support and fit that support into the larger context, which is eliminating the housing crisis in this country. That will give us the surge capacity when, from time to time, we need emergency housing, whether it's from a forest fire or a border issue.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Did Ontario's new government make the same request of the federal government?

[*English*]

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Well, with the previous government we were in negotiation to set up exactly the same system. The current government has said they're not going to have that conversation with the federal government. They've said it's a federal responsibility. I contrast that with the former Prime Minister of Canada, who said that housing was a provincial responsibility.

As far as I'm concerned, if Canadians need housing, all orders of Canadian government have to work together to deliver results. That's the result we're seeing in British Columbia, where we have all levels of government working together to effectively build out the right kind of supportive housing that depopulates the shelter and gives municipalities the capacity they require when natural disasters inside Canada or circumstances outside Canada create a surge and a demand for emergency housing. We have to get away from running emergency housing at 100% in this country. It is not an effective, humane, or even cost-effective way to deal with these issues.

The Province of Quebec has been very focused on this, long before the border issue. The homeless counts in Montreal and Quebec are significantly lower than they are in other cities. Why? Because the provincial government has made it a priority to hold emergency housing in reserve instead of using it as full-time capacity. That surge capacity, now with federal resources, is starting to even out and return to a more manageable set of levels. Hopefully there isn't another significant population displacement. If a forest fire the size of Fort McMurray's, God forbid, happened in the province of Quebec, there would be a whole lot of people looking for emergency housing. We need to build for that and think about that going forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

I'll go to Mr. Tilson.

Mr. David Tilson: What is the plan of the government to house asylum seekers in the future?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The plan, as was true even under your government, is that emergency housing is provided upon immediate point of entry. Then there is a system in place to migrate them into housing supports in the community, whether that's public or private housing. For example, when I was up at the shelter in Toronto doing my due diligence and meeting with city officials on this issue just last week, we saw housing workers who were locating housing spots in the private and public sector markets, housing people to get them out of motels, with the priority on children.

That system has been in place—

Mr. David Tilson: So you're relying on the municipalities.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We are working in partnership with all orders of government and the private sector to provide housing. It's a housing system. It is a shared responsibility.

Mr. David Tilson: The City of Toronto is predicting that illegal border crossers will be taking up to 53% of the city's space by November. What is the federal government planning on doing to rectify that situation? The City of Toronto says they don't have the funding.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: No, what they don't have is the housing. They have the—

Mr. David Tilson: They don't have the funding.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It doesn't matter how much money you have if there isn't a house to rent.

Mr. David Tilson: Okay. I mean, apples and oranges; they say they can't do it.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We're working with other municipalities. We're sitting down with them—

Mr. David Tilson: Yes, but is that all you're going to do, sit down?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: No—

Mr. David Tilson: Don't you have any plan for funding?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Yes, and here's the plan. We are working with neighbouring municipalities, identifying housing resources that aren't being currently used, and we—

Mr. David Tilson: Which municipalities?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We have had conversations with virtually every other municipality in the GTA and as far as Hamilton and St. Catharines. We've also had conversations with North Bay and the Nipissing housing authority, which currently has 400 shelter spaces available and is willing to take people.

● (1325)

Mr. David Tilson: Is that where they're going to go?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: They are going to be mapped. We are going to map out a housing system over a larger geographic region than just the city of Toronto, and we're going to redistribute the problem with resources and supports to make sure that people are properly housed.

Hotels and emergency shelters are no place for children, and we will not stand by and let that happen.

Mr. David Tilson: You keep saying children. That's a great argument, but the question is—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It is a good argument. I'm glad you agree.

Mr. David Tilson: You've repeated it about a dozen times.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: And I'll keep repeating it, because that's where the focus should be.

Mr. David Tilson: The question is this: What are you going to do about it? So far you've said nothing.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I've just told you. We have sourced new housing sites outside the city of Toronto, and we're providing rent, supports, and additional investments—

Mr. David Tilson: Who's going to pay for that?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The federal government is stepping up and meeting its obligations, but there are also—

Mr. David Tilson: How much money is the federal government going to provide?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: You'd have to map out the exact problem.

Mr. David Tilson: But you say you've done that.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: What we have done is we've sat down with our partners, got the statistical information and the data, and then modelled our funding to support the cities and the expenditures they made.

Mr. David Tilson: The City of Toronto has said their housing problems are going to increase—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Your government might cut a cheque for $100 million and then hope they spend it properly, but we do this in real time. We sit down, we collect data, and we meet the responsibilities of the federal government based on the data.

Mr. David Tilson: The data continues to pile up. The City of Toronto—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It's changing on a day-by-day basis. There are surges, and then it's subsiding. We have less than 40—

Mr. David Tilson: Mayor Watson of Ottawa has expressed concern about asylum claimants being brought to Ottawa. My own mayor, the mayor of Orangeville, has expressed concerns about the possibility that our town could be a destination. There doesn't seem to be a lot of foresight by the federal government with respect to this.

I understand you're saying that you are responsible for housing. Does the government have a plan to deal with the housing and this part of the problem?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Yes.

Mr. David Tilson: And will you table that plan with the committee?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The plan is not just simply a question of how we house immigrants and refugees. The plan is how we house all Canadians and all people to be sheltered.

Mr. David Tilson: Will you table your plan with the—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It's the national housing strategy, and it has been tabled.

Mr. David Tilson: When was that created?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the actual policies and the funding, that was created in the first budget, the second budget, and the third budget. There's a $40-billion investment over the next 10 years to build housing.

Mr. David Tilson: That's a long time ago, Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: There is a doubling of the—

Mr. David Tilson: This problem is a serious crisis with all these municipalities now—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It's a serious housing crisis—

Mr. David Tilson: —but what if, and I keep repeating—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —and it would be a housing crisis with or without the immigrants and refugees. That's the issue you need to get your head around.

Mr. David Tilson: You're having a great time interrupting us when we're asking questions, sir. I would appreciate it if you would let us finish asking the question before you start going on and on.

The question is, do you have a plan and will you table it with the committee?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I can get the department to leave the national housing strategy....

Mr. David Tilson: When was the national housing strategy—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Last November.

Mr. David Tilson: What about this year?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: This year, the national housing strategy had additional dollars put in the last budget to facilitate and accelerate the construction of rental housing right across the country. The national housing strategy is that plan. It addresses the issues and the pressures that the emergency housing system is delivering to the housing system as a whole, and that's our plan.

The Chair: Mr. Fraser, we have about three minutes left in this round.

Mr. Sean Fraser (Central Nova, Lib.): Excellent. Thank you very much.

Mr. Vaughan, you mentioned that the housing crisis in the city of Toronto goes back at least to the 1990s. I'm curious. With the moderate influx of asylum seekers we have seen, how much of the housing crisis can actually be attributed to the arrival of asylum seekers, if at all?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Back in 1999, and I'm quoting from the Anne Golden report, about 50% of all refugees, not just the refugee claimants, didn't receive any support when they had their first interview, but were allowed to apply for permanent homelessness. At that point, close to 37% of homeless people in Toronto were refugees and immigrants.

That number has surged in the last year across southern Ontario. London, Hamilton, and different jurisdictions I have been in contact with have experienced the arrival of people almost overnight, sometimes by taxi, looking for emergency shelter. But the housing crisis is not generated by any one single subpopulation. To scapegoat one, or to highlight a different one, or to point fingers at certain subpopulations is not to address the fundamental issue.

The fundamental issue is that, as a country, we are not, and haven't been for a generation, investing properly into the housing continuum and providing the supports and the network necessary to house people efficiently in this country, in particular children.

Mr. Sean Fraser: On that issue, given that there is a range of different possibilities that may be contributing to the housing crisis, why does there seem to be an obstacle vis-à-vis asylum seekers when it comes to reaching a common ground on making investments in housing between the federal and provincial governments in Ontario?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It's because family-sized housing is the hardest housing to build quickly, source quickly, and move people into. It's the most expensive form of housing, in particular in large urban areas. That's why the number of children in the emergency housing system, the shelter system, in Toronto is continuing to grow even though singles and subpopulations are starting to shrink. The challenge we have is housing children and families properly in this country.

● (1330)

Mr. Sean Fraser: Very quickly, just to conclude.... You mentioned the answer you got when you put the question to Stephen Harper and he said to read the Constitution.

In your view, why is it important that the federal government is contributing to investments in housing as part of the national housing strategy?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The history of this country is defined by progressive federal policy around housing. I make it a habit of collecting, when I'm out west in particular, the posters that show when families were seeking refuge from all parts of Europe over the last 100 years. The federal system would grant them land. The land had the sticks and stones and clay to build housing, settle, and start businesses. That's how the west was settled. It was a federal policy present across the globe, attracting Canadians from around the world. That's what has built this country.

Since Confederation, the federal government has had a stake in the federal housing policy. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is called Canadian for a reason. There is a responsibility for federal governments to be engaged.

I agree with the member from B.C. The mistakes that were made in the early 1990s devastated people in this country and created the national housing crisis. The policies over the last 10 years made it worse. We stepped up with a significant 10-year plan that's already spending dollars. I can show the news releases from British Columbia—a very good, very aggressive government on housing. We are spending those dollars and solving those problems now.

The challenge we have is that the emergency shelter system in certain large cities is running at full capacity and as a result can't handle the surge. We have to address that. We have a responsibility.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan. We need to end there.

We're going to have a very brief suspension of the meeting so we can continue with our next guests. I ask members to take just two minutes as we get the teleconference and the new witnesses.

● (1330)

(Pause)

● (1335)

The Chair: I'll reconvene the meeting, which continues with our study of the impact of the irregular crossings at Canada's southern border.

We welcome and thank our witnesses for attending.

I'm going to begin with Minister MacLeod for seven minutes, and then we'll go to Mr. Hope, the mayor of Chatham-Kent, on teleconference. Then we'll go to Mr. Fortin, and then Mr. Boldt.

Madam Minister, go ahead.

● (1340)

Hon. Lisa MacLeod (Minister of Children, Community and Social Services and Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, Government of Ontario): Thank you very much, Chair.

I welcome this opportunity to appear before the committee. My name is Lisa MacLeod, and I am the minister responsible for immigration policy in the new Ontario government.

Our new government, like most or all Ontarians, recognizes the value and the importance of immigration to our economic prosperity. Ontario receives more immigrants than any other province in the country. We also receive more refugees than any other province. We are proud of our ability and capacity to welcome, settle, and integrate immigrants and refugees. Ontarians are generous in welcoming and supporting the settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees, and Ontarians know that immigration enhances all of our prosperity and brings investment and opportunity to our province.

Ontarians also want to know that there is integrity in the immigration and refugee system. Today, I'm appearing before this committee to highlight issues of systemic integrity that have arisen as a result of federal decisions.

Right now, Ontario is receiving an unprecedented number of illegal border crossers who, after crossing, are making a claim for refugee status using a loophole in the Canada-United States safe third country agreement to claim asylum. These crossings are an entirely different matter and are taking advantage of Ontarians' generosity. Our position on this issue has been crystal clear since the new government formed on June 29. Our new government believes that managing the influx of crossers is the federal government's responsibility. The federal government must also fund the services required to support them in full. Ontario can only do so much.

Since January 2016, we have received and welcomed more than 36,000 refugee claimants. In addition, more than 5,500 refugee claimants who made their claims in Quebec have reported moving to Ontario since January 2017. Now communities across our province are straining to support the high number of crossers.

In the city of Toronto, about 45% of shelter occupants are refugees. Our new government has stepped up to facilitate the use of approximately 800 spaces in college and university residences for shelter space during the summer. In addition, funds have been set aside for Red Cross support services in the college residential spaces that are being used as shelters.

After more than a year of consistent pressure on our shelter, welfare, and legal aid systems, the federal government announced that, at a future date, it will provide Ontario with $11 million. We estimate, however, that Ontario's cost to support these crossers is now approximately $200 million. That's $90 million in annualized welfare costs, $74 million in shelter costs for the City of Toronto by the year's end, $12 million and growing in shelter costs for the City of Ottawa, $3 million to the Red Cross to assist with temporary shelters, and $20 million in education costs for the children of these crossers. There has also been a strain on our legal aid system. In addition, the City of London is reporting strains within its shelter system. The problems seem to be spreading without any light at the end of the tunnel.

This crisis situation is aggravated by lengthy delays in the federal government's refugee determination system. Hearings that should be completed within 60 days are now taking approximately two years to be held, with no improvements in sight. This is two years of delays that leave families in limbo. Two years is far too long for people to await a decision. Two years is far too long for people in Ontario to be asked to support crossers whose claims may be denied two or three years from now. The federal government must regain control of the processing timetables, so that failed claimants leave more quickly and those accepted as refugees are able to move ahead and integrate into Ontario society. It is in everyone's interests to have refugee claims processed quickly and efficiently.

The federal government must also address border control and policy issues, including the gap in the Canada-United States safe third country agreement that contributes to the high number of irregular border crossers. In short, it is the federal government's responsibility to identify and fully fund a solution to the crisis caused by the handling of the crossers. That includes working with the City of Toronto, the City of Ottawa, and other affected municipalities to address the housing situation by providing full funding to the municipal shelter system and identifying federal facilities that can be used to house individuals and families currently staying in college dorms, who will be homeless after August 9, when they are expected to move out.

Ontario also expects the federal government to address the costs associated with crossers' access to our welfare and legal aid systems, as well as our education system. Ontario is looking to the federal government to uphold its responsibility to actively manage the influx of border crossers and provide full financial support to cover the costs incurred.

● (1345)

Ontarians are pro-immigration, but the current crisis has tested their patience. I say this to the federal government: Take responsibility for your choices; stand behind them and fully fund them, rather than passing the cost on to hard-pressed Ontario municipalities.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to continue now with the mayor of Chatham-Kent, Mr. Hope.

Thank you, Your Worship, for joining us.

Mr. Randy Hope (Mayor, Municipality of Chatham-Kent): Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak before the committee today.

First of all, I want to put it in perspective, because some may not know where Chatham-Kent actually is. We're in the most southern part of Canada, in Ontario. The important part is that the community of Chatham-Kent is 2,400 square kilometres. Most of that is prime agricultural land, and advanced manufacturing is one of the key areas.

I appreciate the opportunity today, because welcoming newcomers to Chatham-Kent is nothing that we haven't heard of before—whether it be the underground railroad system, with Uncle Tom's Cabin, located in the community of Dresden; the immigrants who came from Europe to our community in the 20th century; or the refugees who located themselves in our community after the Second World War.

Chatham-Kent was also named one of the first welcoming communities in Canada for the Syrian refugees in 2016. Today, we have 75 Syrian refugees who have located in our community and are now productive members of our society. The census showed us that between 2011 and 2016 our population had declined. I don't think we're any different from any other rural community in Ontario. We see people transferring themselves to large urban centres, and smaller communities are faced with school closures, decreasing population, and less of an assessment. In Chatham-Kent, we have 43 people per square kilometre, and the basic assessment that we get supports the infrastructure that we have in our community.

The minister talked about a number of things. I compliment the minister for her remarks about making sure that there is financial responsibility, and that the federal government is working on those issues and is there to support communities such as ours and make sure they have the financial resources.

The refugees are significantly important. When I look at refugees, whether Syrians or those in the current situation.... I had the pleasure of talking with John Tory, the mayor of Toronto, about how we can help. We're talking about people here. A lot of our communities still need a labour force. That is going to be required. It's important that we identify the skills that the individuals may have because they can be major assets to our communities. A lot of our employers are looking for certain skill sets. For instance, in the community of Tilbury we had a job fair looking to fill over 200 vacant positions that required people for employment opportunities. We need to understand this refugee crisis that people are talking about. Most importantly, do these individuals have skill sets that can be transferred into full-time employment opportunities? If they like being here, maybe they will take up continuous residence with our community.

We've done a lot of work in our community. We want to make sure that those who come to Chatham-Kent have the support services that are here. We have received government funding to make sure that certain programs are available, and to make sure that translation, English as a second language, and a number of other things are there to support them. We also support our community college and our elementary school system to deal with foreign students coming to our community. We have schools that are being designated for closure because of the decrease of the student population in our communities.

We see this as an opportunity for our community members to rally behind each other and support each other to make sure that we're bringing people in and giving them gainful employment opportunities, deploying them into a community that is safe, and, most importantly, making sure they feel welcome in the community they are coming to.

Do we believe that the federal government has a responsibility? You are the gatekeeper, whether it's about refugees and asylum seekers, or whether it's about the provincial nominee program. I truly believe that more points need to be given to rural communities across Ontario—and I'm going to speak only about Ontario and not the rest of Canada. Point systems need to be such that investments are made in rural communities. The infrastructure is already there and it is sustainable to take more people people on. This will increase our tax base as they become productive members, buying homes and living in apartments, or whatever it may be, and we need to make sure that people feel safe.

The key point that I'm trying to get across to the committee.... I look forward to the questions. I listened to a little bit before. We could all point fingers as to who failed what on social housing. I, too, have a social housing waiting list, but emergency shelters should follow the true definition of emergency shelters: no more than that. We should make sure that we have affordable housing available for people. We need to make sure that the jobs they are seeking are long-term gainful employment opportunities and that they have the opportunity to build a life.

The minister was absolutely right. Two years is a long wait for anybody to go through any process, whether it be in a provincial nominee program or as a refugee or an asylum seeker. Two years is a long time. If we want them to buy a home, to settle their roots, and to make sure their children are placed in proper schooling systems, then we need to make sure that due diligence is properly done so that the residents get the timely fashion they need in order to become part of Canadian society.

I know that in Chatham-Kent they'd be welcome. I know that the employers in my community would welcome them, because we believe that in Chatham-Kent there is a huge opportunity for them to be a part of our contributing society, to be a part of the community called Chatham-Kent. We want to make sure that they can be spokespeople for newcomers who are maybe looking at Canada as an opportunity and looking at Ontario as a place where they want to work, live, and invest, spokespeople who would say, "You ought to seek out Chatham-Kent because it is a great place to work, live, and play."

I'll stop here. I think what's really important is to work with the committee, because we are talking about humans here. We are talking about human beings with children, and we want to make sure that we as government.... It doesn't matter whether we are the federal, provincial, or municipal government. We as government need to put our best foot forward to make sure that we treat people with the most humane dignity that they deserve, but most importantly to work with them so they can become contributing members of society who, I believe, will shape this country to be even better. We were never afraid of welcoming people, and we need to continue to do that.

● (1350)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move on to Mr. Fortin, national president of the Customs and Immigration Union.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Fortin (National President, Customs and Immigration Union): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the standing committee.

My name is Jean-Pierre Fortin, and I am the national president of the Customs and Immigration Union. Our union has 10,000 members and represents Canada's front-line customs and immigration officers; investigations, intelligence, and trade customs officers; immigration, inland enforcement, and hearing officers; as well as support staff who work at the Canada Border Services Agency. I am an officer myself, with over 18 years of experience on the front line. Over the years, I have seen the government's organizational structure and our workers' jobs evolve.

The CIU has a long history of involvement in border security and immigration enforcement issues on behalf of its members. We seek to offer members operational insight to identify areas of concern and, where possible, to improve them.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as your committee reviews the impact of irregular crossing of Canada's southern border. The issue is of great importance, and it needs an informed review.

In recent years, the greatest number of irregular crossings have taken place between the state of New York and Lacolle, Quebec. I was in Lacolle yesterday meeting with members, who shared their observations and recommendations with me. I can confirm that the situation in Quebec is having an impact across Canada, as front-line CBSA officers are reassigned from their existing positions in land ports and airports to deal with people entering Canada between ports of entry.

CBSA created a pool of volunteer officers who are prepared to deploy to Lacolle when needed. Yesterday, there were six or seven officers from other provinces who were providing assistance. If that number climbs, as we expect it will, there will be a negative impact, as it is creating pressure on the work locations they leave. This, in turn, may cause delays in crossing the border at the work locations they left behind.

This staffing situation is made worse by the fact that there is already a severe shortage of approximately 1,100 front-line officers. The shortage is a result of the former government's 2011 deficit reduction action plan, which was intended to cut unproductive administrative and supervisory positions through attrition while maintaining operational capacities. Unfortunately, the CBSA cuts included front-line personnel at primary, secondary, export clearance, domestic intelligence, foreign intelligence, screening, and immigration enforcement. The situation continues to worsen, as CBSA's attrition rate is higher than the rate at which it is hiring.

Pursuant to both the Customs Act and the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, it is illegal for a person to enter Canada between designated ports of entry. However, those same persons do have the legal right to make a refugee claim once they have entered the country.

Since January 2018, the number of asylum seekers has averaged around 30 or 40 per day. Exceptionally, on some days that number would reach 80. That is the number our officers were expected to clear yesterday at Lacolle. Beginning on the Easter long weekend, which was from March 30 to April 2, the numbers climbed to 150 or 160 per day, and the numbers remained higher than usual—between 100 and 160—until early May.

In early 2018, we observed that a large number of those entering Canada illegally or irregularly were not persons whose temporary protection status in the U.S. was facing revocation. Rather, they were mainly from Nigeria, having lawfully entered the U.S.A. through a visa for the express purpose of entering Canada between ports of entry.

For the last two months, the numbers have stabilized at approximately 40 per day. We believe the drop is likely due to the Canadian government's intervention. The U.S. is no longer issuing visas to Nigerian nationals who merely wish to transit through the U. S. in order to enter Canada.

● (1355)

It is important that appropriate screening take place wherever visas are issued, and I would urge the committee to confirm with the government that appropriate steps have been taken in that regard. While the Nigerian phenomenon was unexpected, as these asylum seekers are not facing revocation of TPS in the U.S., there are now well over 200,000 individuals who do have TPS and who are expected to be required to leave the U.S. in 2019.

As stated earlier, those crossing the border between ports of entry have legal rights to make refugee claims once they have entered the country. If the interviewing officer concludes that the person making a refugee claim is inadmissible, the process is suspended until that issue is resolved. Although we welcome asylum seekers to our country, we also need to ensure that this is not being done to the detriment of security.

Last month, CBSA issued an operational bulletin directing all front-line officers, including those dealing with the situation in Quebec, to restrict their querying of the U.S. National Crime Information Center database, which is equivalent to our Canadian Police Information Centre database. CBSA informed us that the directive came from the United States. I can tell you that this directive raised significant concerns from our members. They reiterated their concerns to me yesterday when I was in Lacolle, and I would recommend that the committee seek an explanation of this directive issuance from the CBSA president.

The CIU has always asked that all officers' mobility be increased so that they are able to monitor activity in between ports of entry. This can be done in partnership with the RCMP.

The Chair: I just need to ask you to draw to a close.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Fortin: The government has just appointed a new Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction. While the exact mandate is unclear, jointly improving our mobility enforcement capacity between ports of entry should be a priority.

I want to thank the committee for having me here.

● (1400)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Boldt, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Randy Boldt (As an Individual): Thank you very much for inviting me.

I'll briefly give you a bit of my background. Before I got involved in immigration, I was a commercial banker in Canada and the United Kingdom. I began my involvement with immigration as the manager and founder of the provincial nominee program in Manitoba for the business side. I later became assistant deputy minister of immigration in Saskatchewan. I started my own immigration company in 2008. I would also like to say that my family came as refugees in 1929, escaping the Soviet Union.

As the levels of asylum seekers grow, both from those who cross the border irregularly and those who apply when they come as visitors and students, the visa officers, as Mr. Fortin was talking about, have ordinary human reactions. They increase refusal rates for all other categories that are coming in temporarily. This is very important for people to understand. Officers are the gatekeepers to Canada, and they see their job as protecting our country from those wanting to enter and make asylum claims. They believe there are good processes for applying as refugees abroad, and coming to Canada as visitors and walking across a non-controlled border crossing are not some of them. If an officer believes that an applicant for a temporary visa has even the slightest intention of applying for asylum, they will be refused a visitor visa or a student visa or a work permit. I work with many visa posts around the world, and officers have made this point abundantly clear to me.

Also, the greater the number of asylum seekers being approved in Canada, the greater the number of refusals will be for temporary visas outside of Canada—students, visitors, and workers. According to the minister's own report, those coming as international students and visitors contributed $32 billion annually to the Canadian economy in 2017, so any increase in refusal rates costs our country billions of dollars a year.

The number of student visa refusals has skyrocketed under the current federal government. In fact, in most provinces it has nearly doubled. The refusal rates have gone from mid-20% three years ago to over 50% in the last three years. Our local Manitoba association wrote to the minister about this. Minister Hussen's response was completely illogical. He simply took down the statistics from the website and refused to provide any statistics via ATIP. This is at the same time that Manitoba and most other provinces are looking at international students as a growing source of skilled labour to fill economic needs.

It has recently been well documented that visitor visa refusals have also risen dramatically. The official rate is now 26%, but this number vastly underestimates this issue. By the way, I also sit on the board of one of the largest Indian travel agencies. As their Canadian director, I can talk with some assurance about this. In places like India, getting a U.S. visa is relatively simple. Conversely, people know that the majority of Indians can't get a visitor visa to Canada, so they simply do not apply. There are millions more visitors who would like to come to Canada but who know that their visas will be refused, so they don't try. The reason they will be refused is that the officers fear they will make an asylum claim.

When we started the provincial nominee program in 1997, the processing time for many years was about six months. Over the next 18 years, it slowly grew to about 11 months. That's the federal processing time. Since the new government has taken over, the processing time has quickly escalated to 19 months. In a province like Manitoba, which relies almost entirely on the provincial nominee program for increases in skilled labour and population growth, this increase in processing time costs our little province tens of millions of dollars a year.

Finally, there is the cost of processing and settling those who make asylum claims in Canada. In my view, this is likely the smallest cost associated with this issue. The other costs—missed opportunities of students and visitors, and companies and communities being without skilled workers—are far larger and more critical. Parliament has asked the Parliamentary Budget Officer to examine the costs associated with asylum seekers. I would like to ask this committee to change and amend that request so that the costs associated with refused visitors, refused students, and delays with economic immigrants be added to the costs associated with these claims.

There is only one department of IRCC, not two. The department allocates resources as they see fit. In 2017 it allocated resources to process Syrian refugees' security screening in 96 hours, down from 30 days. This is at the same time it's taken up to 11 years—a stunning number—to screen some family members who were sponsored by their children. These are resource allocations made by the government. There are no two departments. They keep repeating that there are two streams, but as one stream goes faster, the other stream goes slower. This is irrefutable.

● (1405)

It is also irrefutable that as asylum seeker approval numbers grow, the refusal of other temporary categories goes up substantially.

The approval rate of asylum seekers in the United States under the Obama administration was 18%. In the U.K. it is 28%. In France it is 32%. In Canada, under this government, it is now 70% and rising, but even this rate is dramatically understated.

The 30% who are refused have several ways of remaining. Of course, they can appeal, but contrary to what Mr. Vaughan said, the vast majority of those crossing irregularly are single men. Many refused applicants simply get married and remain as spouses, while others are unable to be removed due to a lack of travel documents or pre-removal risk assessment. There are also humanitarian and compassionate grounds, and some even qualify as federal skilled workers.

To the best of my knowledge, there have never been any statistics released on the actual number of asylum seekers who are allowed to remain in Canada. Anecdotally, visa officers claim that about half of those who are initially refused are allowed to stay for various reasons, for a total of 85% approval. I am not aware of any other developed country that allows 85% of asylum seekers to remain.

In Canada, regardless of which party you are in or support, we passionately believe in fairness. All of us do; no party has a lock on it. Yet when it comes to asylum seekers, it is hyperbole, political correctness, and lack of any economic data or analysis that seem to rule.

There should be one door to enter Canada, and that is the front door.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you to all the witnesses.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Minister, you mentioned a number of estimates on costs at the beginning. I wonder if you could table that for the committee, along with an explanation of how those figures were worked out.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: Thanks very much for your question. Yes, we'll do that for you.

Also, I just want to thank you for holding these hearings. I think it was very enlightening for me.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: We're going to be sending a letter to—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: It's appreciated.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: —my four or five ministerial counterparts in your government—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I don't mean to cut you off, Minister, but I do have limited time, so I want to get into the questions.

The first is on legal issues. You continue to insist, and we heard today that you're using the word "illegal" when describing the situation. Can you tell me where in the Canadian Criminal Code it says that crossing the border to seek asylum is illegal?

We did hear the nuance about the Customs Act, but that still recognizes the legal rights of asylum seekers.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: We're using a term that was used by the federal Minister of Immigration at one point in time.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Excuse me...?

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: The federal Minister of Immigration used it in committee.

I'm not going to get into a debate on semantics. I'm simply here, as the minister responsible for immigration policy in the Province of Ontario, to let you know that there has been a significant strain on our resources to the tune of almost $200 million, and we're simply asking for support not only on shelter costs but on education costs and social welfare.

I'm also the minister responsible for social assistance in the Province of Ontario, and that is a $90-million cost.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I would submit to you that there are other words that can be used. I worry about a situation, with all due respect, that inflames a situation. I am from London, Ontario, and we had an incident you might have seen online that went viral.

These words create a certain perception of what are almost always very desperate people fleeing desperate circumstances.

As a matter of fact, in your presentation, you used the word "choices". Today we heard from lawyers and experts in refugee law that the federal government is in fact legally obligated to ensure that asylum claimants get a hearing to determine if they meet the definition of a refugee. You call it a choice, but a legal obligation is a certain kind of choice.

I wonder, as the minister responsible for refugee issues in the Province of Ontario, whether you are familiar with the 1985 Singh decision of the Supreme Court and whether you recognize its binding legal implications.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: I'm just going to point out that Ontario receives more immigrants and refugees than any other province in the country.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Minister, could you stick to the question? Can you answer the question?

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: We spend more than $110 million annually to welcome, settle, and integrate immigrants and refugees. In addition to that, we spend about $320 million on social assistance.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I appreciate that, Minister, and I don't mean to interrupt you, but there is limited time.

I guess the answer to that question is no.

Do you recognize the 1951 UN refugee convention, and the implications for federal and provincial governments, and furthermore, the fact that provincial governments must recognize and ensure respect for customary international law, and that this UN convention is an example of customary international law? Do you recognize that?

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: I am the minister responsible for immigration policy in the Province of Ontario—

● (1410)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: But there are implications for the province.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: —and we have a growing $200-million bill —

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: The UN convention does—

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: —that we're asking the federal government to pay for.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: With all due respect, the UN convention does—

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: I've been around a long time, 12 years in fact, and I must say this. Just because they put the paper in front of you, it doesn't mean you have to read it.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: No, I come up with my own questions, I promise.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: If you'd like to talk to me constructively, as Bill Blair has, then we could have a conversation about the cost build-up in my city of Ottawa, and the city of Toronto, in addition to what the welfare costs are for my ministry.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Minister, you're ignoring the question. That's why I'm engaging in the way I am. As far as international law goes, yes, the federal government is a signatory to the convention. It's the responsibility of the federal government to do those things, but it does confer certain obligations on the part of the provinces, namely the recognition of and the showing of respect for customary international law. Again, the UN convention is an example of that.

I have only a few minutes left, and I want to speak to the mayor as well.

This is my final question to you. You've attributed the rise in asylum claimants coming into Canada to Twitter. In 2017, 50,000 asylum claimants came to Canada. If it is Twitter, I wonder if social media holds water with respect to what's happened in France. In 2017, 100,000 individuals claimed asylum in that country. In 2017, again, 220,000 individuals claimed asylum in Germany. I wonder, is Twitter responsible for the number of asylum claims in those two countries or is it the usual factors: war, conflict, and poverty?

I think it's important. At least on that issue, let's be on the same page. If Twitter is causing these things, to me that's like talking about an alternative universe.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: To be clear, I'm not the minister responsible for immigration in France; I'm the minister responsible for immigration policy and social assistance in the province of Ontario.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: But you have said things about what caused this.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: The federal government has sole jurisdiction on Canada's borders, and it is your responsibility to identify and fully fund a solution to this most recent influx. What I'm doing here today is simply letting you know that it is costing my ministry about $200 million at a time when we need to deploy the precious little money we have to issues like children's aid societies and children and youth justice.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I look forward to your tabling the documents.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: We look forward to sending them to you.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: We'll take a look at that. This is a challenge, not a crisis. Let's also put that on the record.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: Eight hundred people are—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mayor, thank you very much for appearing via video conference. I know you're a very busy man. I've seen you in Chatham as well. I know that your economy is firing on all cylinders. In 2008 you had 15.8% unemployment, if I'm not mistaken. Now it's down to 5.6% or 5.7%.

The way you described this challenge, it's an opportunity for you. That's what I'm hearing. You have a number of gaps as far as employment goes. You're looking for individuals to fill skill shortages in the community of Chatham-Kent. Could you speak to that, and to the opportunity that does in fact exist, from your point of view?

Mr. Randy Hope: We see this crisis, as everybody refers to it, as an opportunity for my community.

You're right that we did have a huge unemployment rate. We've been successful at generating new investments into our community. We've been supporting companies with the federal and provincial governments' support to help these companies grow.

Now we're in a situation where we have a low unemployment rate, and if companies want to expand, we don't have people. People are the key resources. When I talked to Mayor John Tory, I said that one of the important pieces of information we need is about the skill sets of these individuals.

When you were down here, Peter, I was showing you the job opportunities that are available. If we understood the skill sets of individuals and showed those skill sets to employers, we could almost do pre-interview processes and we could put people into gainful employment.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I appreciate the positive way you approach this issue, Mayor.

Mr. Randy Hope: There will be a need for transferring, to support Toronto and help us. I indicated to you that we have only 43 people per square kilometre. Municipal tax bases are short and we would need assistance during that time frame. If we can get these individuals into gainful employment that supports our local employers, that will give them a talent base that they have never had. I've seen some of the talent base that is actually being displayed —

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to cut you off, Your Worship. Sorry about that. Thank you very much.

Ms. Rempel, go ahead.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

While I have the floor, I want to put something on the record, because my colleague opposite looked slightly surprised when we quoted the Minister of Immigration. At our committee meeting in March, he stated, "I have used the word 'illegal' and I have used the word 'irregular' and I think both are accurate." I look forward to reading the blues and some of the comments that he made and then applying them in the context of the comments that his minister made. But I digress.

Minister MacLeod, here we are. The reality is that, when we look at immigration, I don't think there's a single person in this room—and that's the beautiful thing about Canada—who asks "if" immigration; it's "how". The reality is that, when we accept humanitarian immigration, it's not just about processing them at the border. It's not just about accepting them or signing off on a selection process from the UNHCR. It's about a long-term commitment to their well-being and their integration into the social and economic fabric of Canada. That costs money, and it takes planning. The reality is that provinces bear the burden of a lot of this work because of the scope of jurisdiction in terms of provision of education, health care, and subsidised housing. Part of the difficulty we've had as a committee has been with getting information from the government to understand the needs of this cohort, because we really don't have a sense of who is coming in.

Has the government given you any projections or information on what to expect in the next year and the needs associated with housing, language training, long-term integration, or social welfare payments? Do you have any of that information?

● (1415)

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: No. The federal government has not provided us with any indication of how many new refugee claimants Ontario will be receiving over the next 18 months, but we do know from the federal government's refugee claimant data that from January 2017 to May 2018 Ontario received 5,585 refugee claimants who made their claim in Quebec and then moved to Ontario. Between January and May 2018, 21.4% or 1,675 of all refugee claimants were children under the age of 15.

We have asked and we would like the federal government to be more specific in the information on the profile of claimants coming from the Quebec border, such as data on education and skills levels. This data can support service planning and costing in terms of language training, as well as other initiatives. It says we look at this. I have a very large ministry. One of the concerns we have, as the bills start to pile up, is where to take that money from.

I am responsible for women who are escaping trafficking or domestic violence. There is the Children's Aid Society, the youth justice system, social assistance, Ontario disability support, children with autism. That's what keeps me up at night. We can go down rabbit holes on terms and get into semantics, but I don't think that's the debate we should be having. We should be having a debate on how the federal government can fully fund the situation so we can make Ontario and our municipalities whole.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In terms of your planning, you alluded to the fact that the government hasn't made a decision at this point to seek to apply the safe third country agreement to the entire Canadian border. I would assert that this has signalled a significant policy change. As the parliamentary secretary to ESDC stated, this is the new normal.

Ontario is in a severe deficit situation right now. You just talked about choices. What do those choices look like?

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: Our new government announced just last week that it would be doing line-by-line audits because there has been a major dispute between the previous administration and the financial accountability officer and the Auditor General. We could be facing a deficit anywhere between $12 billion and $20 billion, or maybe more. I don't know. In the next two months we will figure that out.

Running one of the largest government departments in the Province of Ontario, I can tell you that we will have to make choices. When we look at our budget, and the fact that we are in a significant deficit situation, the priorities in my ministry are, for example, children who are suffering from autism, the Children's Aid Society, and youth in care and custody. These are areas that we—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Look, we don't want to talk about choices. Those are tough things to talk about because there are finite resources. It's incumbent upon all of us to discuss how to prioritize and make choices and also treat people with dignity and compassion.

We have been asking for information about this for some time and asking the government to come up with a plan. What concerns me is that, rather than focusing on the how, and the data we need to get to the how, the last couple of weeks we have seen a lot of name-calling, specifically to you. I've heard the terms "alt-right" and "un-Canadian" used about you. It's not a laughing matter.

● (1420)

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: It's hard to be called something like that with—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Very briefly, is that going to help? We might have different political stripes here, but you don't have to like someone to work with them. Has that actually helped provincial relationships in planning for the 800 people who are about to be evicted from a college dormitory?

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: We do have an emerging issue. It is the crisis of where we're going to house 800 people in Toronto who right now are in two college dormitories.

Let me say this. I grew up in a small town called New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. I went to St. Francis Xavier. We had a saying there: You don't necessarily have to accept, but you must respect other people's points of view. What shocked me as a new minister a week into the job was the escalation of some rhetoric.

I was very pleased to have the opportunity on two occasions in the last week to speak with Minister Blair, and I am looking forward to a collaborative relationship with him and a change in tone and style.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: That is, if we can find out what his job is. We are still working on that. We are on the hunt. We will keep you apprised of our efforts.

Thank you.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Chair, with the time I have left, I move:

> That, in relation to the Committee's study of the impact of irregular crossing of Canada's southern border, the Committee report its findings to the House and request a government response to that report.

Mr. Chair, we haven't clarified the results of these meetings. Given that there are some fairly significant points that have come up over the last several hours of testimony, including that the government intends to provide additional payments—we don't know how much, when, or what that's projected on—I think it's important for us to summarize the findings of this committee, especially tabling the motion this morning on the cost.

I would ask, Mr. Chair, that this committee put together a formal report based on the testimony we have heard here. I think the role of this committee, even if we can't agree on how, should be to point out to the government that there are some gaps in information that are preventing the public, members of the media, and our provincial counterparts from coming up with policy and planning. I would argue and assert that it is our role as parliamentarians to help define and assess whether government expenditures are appropriate. I don't think we're there yet.

I would be very surprised if my Liberal colleagues would not support the tabling of a report in the House of Commons. To me, a vote against this is really a vote against having a plan. I would really like our committee to support tabling a plan in the House of Commons and asking the government to report its findings to the House as soon as possible.

The Chair: There is a motion now on the floor, in relation to the committee's study on the impact of irregular crossing of Canada's southern border, that the committee report its findings to the House and request a government response. Is that a fair summary of it?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Correct.

The Chair: Mr. Whalen, go ahead.

Mr. Nick Whalen: I move to adjourn debate.

The Chair: There is a motion to adjourn debate on that motion. It's not debatable.

There are only three votes on the Conservative side, just to remind you. One of you can't vote. I'm not sure who; you decide.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: That motion is passed, so we adjourn debate on that motion.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I believe I still have about 30 seconds left.

The Chair: You have 12 seconds.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Minister, would you have liked to see this committee provide a report on this particular issue, after appearing here and hearing all of these witnesses and their testimonies?

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: Yes. The witnesses have been outstanding. I would look forward to seeing that if it were made available.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: It's unfortunate, isn't it?

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: Yes, it's too bad.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Kwan, go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the minister and all the witnesses who are here before us.

I think it was unfortunate that the Liberal members adjourned the debate on simply calling for the committee, after this study, to table a report and to get a response from the government.

I think we're in this situation of having a summer session, an emergency sitting if you will, on this issue because the Liberals, on five occasions last year, voted to adjourn debate on my motion calling for a study on this very issue. Had we done that, we might not be having this conversation today. Had we done that, we might actually have a real plan in place. Had we done that, we might not be saddled with the challenge we're faced with to the degree that we are. I think it's unfortunate. Hiding yourself, sticking your head in the sand, is not going to solve the issue. Simply reading from your talking points, to say you have a plan, doesn't mean that you actually have a plan. I do think it's unfortunate. I would have supported that motion, but adjournment of debate on that motion was made prior to my even getting the floor to speak to it. I think that's too bad.

I want to turn to this issue with you, Minister MacLeod. You mentioned that you're simply using the word "illegal" because the Minister of Immigration used that word. You're correct. The Minister of Immigration used the word "illegal", on March 19 I believe, to describe asylum seekers. He said that both words are accurate, and he uses the terms "illegal" and "irregular" interchangeably. In fact, the Prime Minister himself, in question period on April 25, used the word "illegal" as well. I think they're wrong.

The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act clearly states that when a person crosses the border, directly or indirectly, for the purpose of seeking asylum, they are not committing a criminal offence. The act actually states that very clearly.

My question for you, Minister MacLeod, is this. If the Minister of Immigration admits that he was wrong, will you also stop using this word and admit that you're wrong as well?

● (1425)

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: Well, thanks very much for the question. Also, thank you for your leadership, along with MP Rempel, in making sure that these committee hearings are taking place and that I have the opportunity to come here and speak on behalf of Ontario.

Look, many people have used many different terms. The minister himself has used "irregular" and "illegal". The new minister for border services used "unlawful" the other day on *Metro Morning*. I'm not going to get into a debate on semantics and what we're calling them. We can agree to disagree on language, but I think what we must all agree on is what the first ministers came out with on Friday, which is that the federal government has created this issue.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I'm going to pause here because time is of the essence. It's not just semantics; it is the law. The law actually states that when people come to Canada for the purposes of immigration, under IRPA, when they cross over to Canada through an irregular point of entry, they are not committing an offence. That is the law. It's not just semantics. It's very important to actually get the language right and correct. I am going to make every effort to get the Minister of Immigration to admit that he was wrong so that we can set the record straight once and for all and stop casting aspersions against asylum seekers by calling them illegal.

I'm going to move to another question here with respect to a plan. We've been talking about a plan. One issue, of course, is the need to admit that the safe third country agreement is causing people to cross over irregularly in substantial numbers. I think that's created disorder, if you will, particularly for border communities. The plan would need to incorporate an action with respect to that, and that would be to suspend the safe third country agreement.

Now, the immigration levels plan actually has a stream for protected persons. The target for 2018 is 16,000. That number has already been exceeded, of course. My question to you, Mr. Fortin, is this. For the purposes of planning for CBSA staff, for IRB staff, for RCMP staff, and so on, doing the work your members do each and every day, would it not be better for the government to establish a plan by adjusting the immigration levels number to more accurately reflect the reality we are faced with today? We knew, I think, since January 2017, since the Trump administration formed office, that these numbers were going to increase significantly. We're seeing that. We knew it then. We know it now.

Would you support the call for the government to adjust the immigration levels plan for the protected persons stream, to increase the number or double the number, to more accurately reflect the reality that we're faced with today?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Fortin: Part of the plan that the government has put in place, and that's where we do disagree—I wouldn't say the government but more the CBSA—is that they have created a number of officers who volunteer to be deployed at Roxham Road or Lacolle to help with that situation. The problem is that the volunteers are coming from the offices, which are already very tight with their resources. To answer your question very directly, if tomorrow morning we triple the number of asylum seekers coming across, we would be in trouble. That's the way we had voiced our concerns about the levels of resourcing we have right now.

● (1430)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Right, so precisely, if you adjusted the levels plan targets in anticipating a greater number, then that would mean that you would have to adjust the resources accordingly—not rob Peter to pay Paul, but rather, increase the staffing for CBSA, increase the staffing for RCMP, increase the staffing for IRCC, and equally important, increase the resources at the IRB so these cases can be processed expeditiously and we can actually get on with dealing with the issue effectively. Would that not be required as part of the plan?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Fortin: Yes, that would be required. Right now, as I said, the situation is being contained. The problem is that we're forecasting that more than 200,000 people in the United States who are on TPS permits, which will be ending, will have two choices: either to leave and go back to their country or to try to come to Canada. We suspect that they would be taking the second option.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It remains to be seen what will happen, but right now people are coming through and there are pressures created for the border communities. If the government adjusted the numbers to reflect what we saw last year, by doubling the protected persons numbers, I think we would be more equipped to deal with this situation. Of course, we've had a chronic problem of underfunding the IRB. From the Conservatives to the Liberals, this has been a chronic problem and it continues to persist. If we actually funded it properly, we might not be faced with the kinds of challenges that we are faced with today.

Ms. MacLeod, you also mentioned processing—

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to end it there. You had an extra 30 seconds.

I'm just going to extend the meeting for a few minutes unless there's unanimous consent to adjourn.

Mr. Fraser, if you have just a couple of minutes, then you can close.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Excellent. Thank you very much.

As a fellow Pictou County native and StFX graduate, Ms. MacLeod, congratulations on your appointment. It's a pleasure to see you here today.

One of the things I want to touch on is as much a plea as it is a question. You've described, I think, in an innocent way the use of the term "illegals" as simply being semantics.

The fact is that, as Ms. Kwan pointed out, it is a matter of law, but it's also very important to recognize that words very much do matter. When we refer to people as illegals or queue jumpers, when we talk about there being a crisis when the evidence we hear is actually that there is a well-managed response to this challenge, it creates a second class of human being who's living within our borders today. That is not something I'm okay with.

One of the things we have to be very careful about is the warning we received from the representative from the UN today, who said that this kind of language could be populist rhetoric and it can dehumanize asylum seekers. I don't think that you use this language maliciously. As I said, I think it's innocently held—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sean Fraser: One thing we really have to be careful about is that we need not—

The Chair: We have a point of order.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I seek unanimous consent from the committee to table the blues from the March 19 meeting, where the immigration minister under this federal government said that he used the terms interchangeably. It might help my colleague's comments.

The Chair: Unanimous consent to present the blues.... I just want to check. The blues no longer exist after the—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: My apologies. I'll clarify. Unanimous consent for the *Hansard*—

The Chair: It's the record of proceedings, the actual minutes of the meeting—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Yes, the record.

The Chair: The blues disappear, do they not?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I mean the record of the proceedings, my apologies.

The Chair: The blues are replaced by the record of the proceedings, which is a public document.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Yes, it might be helpful.

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sean Fraser: May I continue, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Mr. Fraser, you may continue.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Regardless of what specifics we're using in a different context, the real point I'm trying to make is that it's not asylum seekers crossing borders that we need to fear; it's the ideas and the potential for discrimination that are invading our politics that I am most concerned about.

I wanted to take this chance. As an StFX graduate, you may appreciate, Minister, a very inspirational story about a newcomer family, the Hadhads, who are making chocolate in Antigonish. My friend Tareq Hadhad posted not long ago on Facebook. He said, "I am so sad how #Ontario government is acting against the real Canadian values of openness and welcome by spreading hatred that impacts directly the most vulnerable group of asylum seekers. No one was born to immigrate. But if they are forced to leave their homes, let's show some kindness! #kindnessMatters".

This is the impact, intended or not, of some of the language being used, not just by you but people across the political spectrum. We need to be careful. My request is for you, when you get back to Queen's Park, to have a conversation with your colleagues—and I'll undertake to do the same with mine—that we be careful in our choice of language, because words matter. It's causing a real impact for the people who live and work in my riding.

● (1435)

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: I don't agree with the characterization whatsoever. I look forward to going to New Glasgow, Nova Scotia next week for my 25-year high school reunion and to give a speech to the Pictou County Chamber of Commerce.

The rural values I grew up with extended well and have served me extremely well for the past five elections in the nation's capital, where I served with former minister Poilievre in Nepean—Carleton, which is one of the most diverse ridings in all of Ontario. It has welcomed not only immigrants from around the world, in particular from China and India, but also a number of Syrian refugees.

I really disagree with your characterization. In fact, I think that when you suggest this, you're actually contributing to the negative tone in this debate. This is a very emotional debate for many people.

I'm simply here today as the minister responsible for a number of different former ministries in the Province of Ontario. I have a $200-million price tag that I need you guys to pay for. You would rather have a debate on words. I would rather have a debate on making sure that I can fund my ministry and the programs that I'm responsible for, and that is children and youth, children in care, children in the justice system, children with autism. It is the Ontario disability support program. It is Ontario Works, women escaping trafficking, women escaping domestic violence. It is a plan to eradicate poverty in the province of Ontario. That is who I am standing up for: all the people in the province of Ontario who rely on my ministry for the services it delivers. I am here today indicating that there is a $200-million price tag that your government needs to pick up.

That's why I accepted the invitation. That's why I am here. I'm very happy to be back in the nation's capital. I live 20 minutes away. I have issues with the federal government making policy choices and then expecting the municipalities of Ontario and the Province of Ontario to pay for those.

I would encourage all of you to understand that there are severe constraints on the Province of Ontario and we are simply asking to be made whole. You can have a debate on the dictionary and the thesaurus, and I'd be happy to let you do that. I have a job to do, and I have very vulnerable people who rely on me to do that job, so I'm going to continue to do that.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Minister, I support the causes you're pursuing. I believe they're noble. I want you guys to be able to come to the table with us to help work on this problem because, as we learned through earlier panels, it is one of shared jurisdiction. We're looking for a partner, and I hope and trust that we'll be able to work with the Ontario government.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod: I'm going to continue to do what all first ministers did last week.

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to end it at that point. We have five minutes. We're going to adjourn the meeting now, and we will begin our third meeting in about 20 minutes.

The meeting is adjourned.

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